

Cuyahoga Valley

National Park Service

U.S. Department of the Interior

Cuyahoga Valley National Park



Prehistoric People

Prehistoric American Indian groups called the Cuyahoga Valley home for thousands of years. Through momentous changes in culture and technology, these people adapted to their changing environment. The fact that they left no written record of their existence fascinates us and captures our imaginations. Who were these early people? How did they survive? Why did they choose to call this valley home? Where did they go?

We look to archeologists to help answer these questions. Items such as pottery, metal, and stone tools survive to tell us about the people who used them. Using these artifacts and remnants of camps and villages, archeologists describe Ohio's prehistoric people as having lived in four broad time periods.

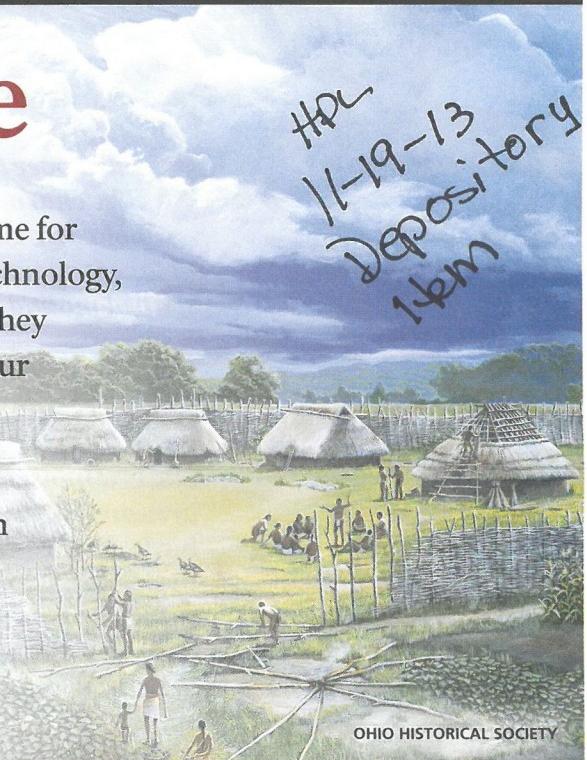
Paleo (13,500 – 10,000 years ago)



OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Above the Cuyahoga River, on a glacial knoll, stands a group of young men with spears at the ready. Below them a beautiful sight, mastodons. They work together, moving quickly. At the end of the hunt, they pull their tools from the carcasses that will become food, clothing, and tools. Lost in the excitement are a few stone points. Years later, archeologists excavating along Everett Road uncover a single stone spear point, the only evidence of a hunt that took place thousands of years ago.

This scene may have played out time and time again. Paleo Indians, the first known inhabitants of the Cuyahoga Valley,



OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

hunted mammoth, mastodon, bison, and other large game animals that roamed across the region. These nomadic big game hunters entered the Cuyahoga Valley as the Wisconsin Glacier retreated 12,000 years ago. Traveling in small groups allowed them to follow their food. Their constant movement meant that they traveled light and left few artifacts behind.

Evidence of their lives in the Cuyahoga Valley is sparse, just single spear points and waste flakes. Crafting these points involved finding a strong stone, striking it with another, and shaping the point with antler. Additional sites may exist under the present day water table, leaving us with little knowledge about the valley's first inhabitants.

Spear point.
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Archaic (10,000 – 3,000 years ago)



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The motion is monotonous, forward and back, forward and back. Occasionally the women stop to stretch their arms and necks. Then it's back to work, grinding plants between two stones, flakes of the stone becoming part of the meal. Conversation helps pass the time. There are several families living together for the season. They've returned to this bluff above Tinkers Creek for several years now, but they'll be moving on in a few months. Just then the men return from the hunt with a white-tailed deer. The women pause to appreciate their good fortune and return to the work at hand.

Around 10,000 years ago, the glaciers had fully receded and the Cuyahoga Valley began to resemble what you see today.

Residents hunted white-tailed deer, rabbit, and turkey. Atlatls, spear throwers that are weighted by stones, made it easier to hit the fast-moving targets. Plants became an important part of the daily meal, including domesticated plants such as little barley.

Stable food sources allowed valley residents to stay in base camps longer and travel in bigger groups, leaving more artifacts behind for future archeologists to uncover. Their yearly return to the same camps may also have encouraged them to bury their dead in a ceremonial manner. At Terra Vista No. 2, a base camp located in the national park, archeologists uncovered six burials within a gravel knoll. The mineral red ochre covered the bodies.

Woodland (3,000 – 1,000 years ago)



Duck effigy pipe.
OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

They gathered to say goodbye to a man who had meant the world to his family. The small group entered the charnel house that held others who had passed away. They placed him in a log tomb with items meant to honor his life: a stone pipe, a sheet of mica, and copper. After the dirt was piled over the tomb, they stepped back. The charnel house was full. It could hold no more loved ones. It was time to take it apart. Left behind was a dome-shaped mound, a reminder of those lost.



Ceramic jar.
OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

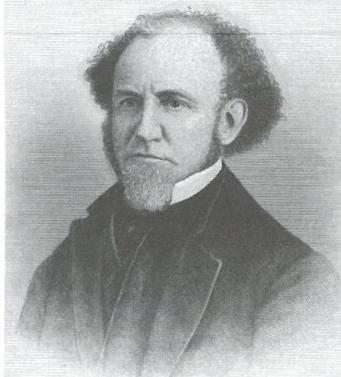
Nearby, along the banks of Furnace Run, life continued in the village. Some residents harvested crops, while others worked moist clay into vessels. Skilled artisans crafted mica into the shape of birds. Years later, while building a school in Everett, workers uncovered pieces of sheet mica, ashes, charcoal, and human bones. These were the lone remnants of this once vibrant prehistoric community.

As European settlers moved west they couldn't help but notice the earthen mounds that dotted the Ohio landscape. The Adena and Hopewell are credited with the creation of elaborate mounds and earthworks in southern Ohio. The early and middle Woodland Indians of the Cuyahoga Valley were influenced

by these great mound builders. Mound excavations yielded artifacts that point to elaborate trade networks. These objects included copper from the Great Lakes, obsidian from the Yellowstone area, Knife River Flint from North Dakota, and marine shells from Florida. In exchange for these natural resources, Ohioans traded colorful flint that could be crafted into strong tools. One of the few earthworks subject to recent archeological excavations is Fort 5 at the Greenwood Site. Located along the Old Carriage Trail, visitors can read the wayside exhibits and see the outline of the earthworks.

Less obvious to early settlers were the habitation sites of those who built the mounds. The village of Everett is one of the few places in the valley that we find fire hearths and storage pits that give us a little information about daily life in the valley. Coupled with information from sites around the state, archeologists believe that people were living together in larger groups for longer periods of time—hunting, gathering, and domesticating plants and animals. Pottery allowed people to cook and store extra food. Some individuals developed specialized skills. They became traders, artists, farmers, and more.

Whittlesey (1,000 – 360 years ago)



Charles Whittlesey.
OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The dirt-filled baskets are heavy and endless. The earthwork was already nine feet wide and 100 feet across, taking the shape of a rectangle with rounded corners. He could see the narrow opening in the southeast corner. Pausing to catch his breath, he looked out over the Cuyahoga River floodplain. Below he knew that people were gathering crops from the garden: corn, beans, and squash. The thought made him hungry, but it would be awhile before the days' work would be done.



Burnt corn cob artifacts.
OHIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In 1871 Colonel Charles Whittlesey first hiked through the forests of the Cuyahoga Valley, documenting the extraordinary earthworks. He titled the site described above as Fort No. 8, likely located in the northwest corner of Northampton Township. His maps are the first

known drawings of late prehistoric sites in the valley and continue to be used by archeologists today. In honor of his work throughout the state, his name was given to Ohio's last prehistoric inhabitants.

A site near Canal Visitor Center called South Park yielded fire hearths, storage pits, and structures that paint a picture of year-round villages where fields produced enough to feed the inhabitants. In contrast to earlier Woodland sites, no evidence was found of beautifully crafted trade items. Many villages were surrounded by embankments and ditches. Did the Whittlesey feel the need to protect their property, goods, and people? We may never know. By 1650 the Whittlesey abandoned northeastern Ohio, never having contact with the Europeans who would soon migrate here.

Changing Times

Prehistoric American Indians adapted to changing environments both culturally and technologically. We see these adaptations in the tools they used, the plants they harvested, the places they settled, and the art they created. National Park Service archeologists

continue to uncover clues that offer a glimpse into the past. Change continues to be a part of our lives. The National Park Service encourages you to ask yourself how you will adapt to changing conditions. What might we learn from those who came before?

Please obey laws protecting America's prehistoric heritage by not disturbing sites or collecting artifacts.

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